DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 056 CS 505 431

AUTHOR Schliessmann, Michael R.
TITLE The Ethics of Western Rhetoric as a Basis for Teaching Foreign Students.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (72nd, Chicago, IL, November 13-16, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Controversial Issues (Course Content); *Foreign Students; *Freedom of Speech; Higher Education; Intercultural Communication; Public Speaking; Rhetorical Invention; *Speech Communication; *Speech Instruction

ABSTRACT

An increase in foreign student enrollment and subsequent questioning of traditional concepts of western rhetorical practice, particularly freedom of speech, resulted in an evaluation of current teaching practices in South Dakota State University's basic speech communication course. In a summer session course, 36 international students responded to a survey asking them to describe the best imagined speaker. The majority of respondents focused on traditional delivery mechanisms, but made little mention of free speech values. In the basic speech course, appreciation for freedom of speech is fostered through discussion of controversial issues. However, many foreign students come from countries where free speech is not a political right and where many feel it is improper to criticize their government. When students in the summer course were asked to prepare speeches detailing a harm in an existing policy system, only two students dealt with issues directly associated with their countries. Furthermore, some students indicated privately that they feared being reported to their government by their colleagues. Since the students were not forced to address problems in their own countries, an ethical dilemma was averted. Still it was clear that the concept of free speech should be discussed explicitly in such courses. (SRT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED277056

THE ETHICS OF WESTERN RHETORIC AS A BASIS FOR TEACHING FOREIGN STUDENTS

BY

MICHAEL R. SCHLIESSMANN

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Michael R. Schliessmann

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper presented at
Seventy-Second Annual Meeting
Speech Communication Association
November 13-16, 1986
Chicago, Illinois

CS505431

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

As global communication becomes more complex, it seems that the university setting is opened to more students from other cultures. As with any change in the racial and/or ethnic mix of the student population, some turmoil in the classroom setting may occur. Professors of higher education are not immune from static methods of teaching, any more than bankers are immune from traditional investment practices. A problem occurs when the change confronts the unwary, rather than having the wary prepared for the change. This type of change, while rather small in total number and percent confronted me in the classroom several years ago.

During the 1981-82 academic year, the racial and ethnic mix of the university student body made a seemingly remarkable change. Our foreign student enrollment began to increase. By 1984 fall semester, foreign students numbered 364 and represented 45 countries.[1] This number amounted to about 5 percent of the student population, a low percentage on its face, but not when one considers the fact that we have few non-foreign cultural or racial minority students enrolled. The numbers for the 1985-86 academic year roughly parallel the earlier ones. Our average foreign student enrollment is approximately twice the national figures reported by the Chronicle of Higher Education for 1984.[2]

As a course required for graduation for every major, Speech Communication 101, Fundamentals of Speech, becomes a temporary home for every student. The increase in foreign

student enrollment was clearly reflected in this public speaking oriented course, although the influx came slowly. It was not until about 1983 that foreign students began taking Fundamentals of Speech in large numbers. The greatest enrollment came during summer school. There are two possible reasons for this development. First, students arriving as freshmen would be likely to postpone enrollment in Speech 101 because they would be required to communicate extensively in a non-native tongue. While most are quite proficient in English, much of their personal communication seems to be in their native language. Thus, putting off the basic speech course becomes an attractive option. Foreign students also seem to prefer taking fundamentals of speech in the summer because the courses are more concentrated, and credit loads are limited. Therefore, the students can spend the required time on the speech class. Because of this enrollment trend these summer speech classes often become highly homogenous.

During the 1984 Summer Session, I became aware of a certain discomfort felt by foreign students in the basic speech course. This apparent discomfort led me to question the assumptions upon which the course is based. Though it may be simplistic, my assumptions are:

> The student will learn the traditional concepts of Western rhetorical practice.

> The student will practice public speaking as it is practiced in a Western democracy.

Some expansion of these is necessary.

Our basic speech course is taught from the perspective of traditional rhetorical practice. We still teach the four major Canons of Rhetoric. The speeches required must be strongly grounded in rationality, reasoned from the best available evidence. We actively teach the major organizational forms which enhance rational thinking. Style is treated as an integral part of the rational processes, and the student is often instructed to avoid emotionality as a substitute for evidence and reasoning. Delivery is treated as a vehicle to effective interpretation of material, avoiding delivery excesses in favor of strong content. This brief analysis points out how the speaker is instructed at the basic level. At the same time, s/he is cautioned through analysis assignments to be wary of any area of traditional rhetorical practice which may lead an audience member away from rational decision-making. While this view of Western rhetorical practice may be simplistic, it does form the foundation for instruction in the basic speech course.

Simply put, the student should also practice public speaking to the greatest degree possible as it is practiced in Western democracy. This means that the precepts of freedom of speech apply and should be encouraged. This

principle is fundamental to democratic processes and is openly encouraged in Western thought. Obviously, the classroom situation places such constraints as grades upon the speaker but these constraints should not mitigate against adhering to free speech principles. Basically, I encourage students to be heard on topics of their choice, given assignment constraints.

Given what I felt was some discomfort with the basic speech course, I tried to determine what may cause this phenomenon. The approach was two-pronged. First, I was interested in the reaction of the international students to traditional rhetorical principles. Secondly, I questioned my emphasis on free speech principles.

Traditional Rhetorical Principles

To determine the extent to which the international students adhered to such principles, I administered an open-ended survey modeled after the study done by Masterson and Watson.[3] Essentially, this instrument asks the respondent to describe his/her "best imagined speaker." The instrument was given to summer session students only. They were asked to respond to the material prior to taking the basic speech course. Ideally, it was hoped that this tactic would lead to descriptions untainted by the Western rhetorical education.

Composition of the Respondent Group

Thirty-six international students in Summer School 1985 responded to the survey in a fashion considered to be timely. That is, responses were returned to the instructor before the course began to deal specifically with Western rhetorical practices or before the students were required to read the textbook and accompanying materials. A total of fifty-two international students were enrolled in Summer School Speech 101 sections during this time. Thirty-three men and three women responded.

The nationality mix represented in the sample was as follows:

Malaysian (Malay)	9
Malaysian (Chinese)	15
Malaysian (Indian)	4
Singaporean	1
Jordanian	2
Indonesian	1
Cameroonian	1
Botswanan	1
Palestinian	2

In this particular listing, Malaysian students predominated. They are listed above according to their cultural heritage as well. Malay is the dominant culture in Malaysia, even though Chinese Malaysian make up a significant number of the popuiation. This factor of cultural blend takes on some importance later in the discussion. The international student mix on our campus is heavily Malaysian, so the mix in Speech 101 roughly approximates the student body population.

Descriptors of "best imagined speaker"

Following the format set by Masterson and Watson, the survey asked the respondents to indicate the sex of the "best imagined speaker." Twenty-one indicated that they "didn't think about the sex of the speaker." Two indicated that the ideal speaker was female; thirteen responded that the speaker imagined was male. At best, this indicates that the students do not stereotype speakers according to sex.

The responses of the students can be grouped in the four traditional Canons of Rhetoric. These responses show a fairly clear pattern, even though single comments may occur in the categorization. Items were recorded using the language of the respondents. Where similar concepts were evident, a tally was kept to indicate frequency of similar responses. This discussion gives a descriptive picture of the best imagined speaker of those surveyed.

Items which clearly indicate student response to delivery mechanisms dominate the responses. One-third of the students responded that the speaker spoke with a loud and clear voice. Others indicated that the speaker had an effective voice and could be understood; five mentioned that the speaker spoke fluently and steadily. Also mentioned were the use of effective pauses and rate usage. The respondents expected a speaker to maintain strong eye contact as well. Eight students indicated that the

appearance of the speaker was important, and one of these mentioned the importance of posture.

These comments parallel those things we teach as comprising effective delivery. The focus of our basic speech course, however, is not delivery. We try to concentrate primarily on the inventive process. The preponderance of comments from the students did deal with traditional delivery mechanisms.

The use of language or style was not mentioned to any significant degree. Only five students mentioned descriptors which could be viewed as being stylistic. One indicated the necessity of repetition. Another student mentioned repetition in the following way:

> President Sukarno [of Indonesia] is an excellent speaker for me because he never use repeatation word in different sentence but he put the same word in the same sentence for special meaning [sic].

This appears to be a precise acceptance of repetitious wording, and one which I find interesting. Three others mentioned clarity of language specifically.

Similarly, the speaker's organization was not considered important by the respondents. Only four students indicated that their best imagined speaker was well-organized. In addition, one stated that the "main points supported the thesis." This wording is so specific to lecture and text material that I suspect the student had previously taken a speech course.

I view invention or the creative process of public speaking as the critical one to teach. It certainly cannot be taught or inspired free of interaction with other traditional canons. It can, however, be isolated to a degree, as can the others. Thus, in addition to those canons mentioned above, I looked for descriptive phrases or words which could be categorized as contributing to the proof necessary to the creative process.

A handful of students mentioned traits which could be construed as characteristics of the imagined speaker. Two students mentioned that the speaker had a firm character or a strong personality. Four attributed "knowledge" to their best imagined speaker. Four others indicated that such a speaker must have conviction. Still others, singly, indicated that a speaker should be objective and emotional. These can be loosely construed as characteristics contributing to the speaker's credibility.

The public speaking course we teach deals heavily with searching for and using evidence as a basis for drawing conclusions. Only seven students specifically mentioned the use of evidence. One student mentioned a type of evidence "other than examples." One respondent indicated that the speaker should be "armed with solid facts." The others indicated that examples were the type of evidence expected.

Specific comments about the best imagined speaker were categorized into the traditional canons of speech. Since

these are the basis for teaching the basic speech course here, this option was used as the categorization method. There were other comments, however, which defied simple categorization. They seemed to be comments about the overall effectiveness of the speaker. Various students offered such comments as these:

> The speaker "caught and maintained the attention of the audience."
> The speaker was "naturally talented."
> The speaker was "charismatic."
> The speaker was "well-prepared."
> The speaker spoke "forcefully yet sweetly."
> The speaker had "certain specific talents that allowed him to enter the mind and heart of the audience."

These brief comments summarize attitudes toward an ideal speaker. Some are quite simple, others poetic and profound. As a general rule, it seems that this group of students placed a great emphasis on delivery skills when assessing the best imagined speaker. Other traditional skills of effective rhetoricians were mentioned as well.

Without strong support, I would assert that most untrained Western listeners view delivery as a predominant factor in assessing the speaker. To a degree, we are socialized to judge quickly on the vocal and visible--the delivery. Basic speech courses oriented to education of students in rational thought may direct attention away from the aspect of delivery. That is, they encourage the use of evidence, sound reasoning and appropriate organization--all couched in effective language use. A quick survey of basic

speech texts clearly reveals this bias. Little time is spent on delivery.

Thus, it would seem that non-native speakers of English roughly echo the sentiments of their counterparts in this university. If the viewpoint of native speakers of English about speakers differed significantly from the views of non-native speakers, an ethical question might be raised. It seems, however, that both groups of students respond to delivery when describing the characteristics of a speaker.

Free Speech and Non-native Speakers

A second tenet upon which our basic speech course is built is that free speech is the foundation of a democratic society. To this end, students are encouraged to discuss a variety of substantive issues in the classes. Only infrequently will the staff discourage discussion of topics, and this is usually for a sound educational reason. Our approach is two-pronged. First, it encourages discussion of relevant topics which may be unpopular. Secondly, it shows the student the responsibility s/he must take in society. Both, I believe, are based on our human principle of free expression. It must be noted, however, that this encouragement is tempered by assignment requirements.

While this view has not been roundly objected to by foreign students, there has been enough consternation to make me take some note. I do not "teach freedom of speech"

as a part of the basic course, but I do make serious reference to the human principle which theoretically drives governmental principle. For foreign students this implies that I would like them to discuss and offer change for governmental and/or societal problems in their own countries. Some foreign students, especially Malaysians, view this position quite negatively. First, the principle of free speech which we so dearly protect is not adhered to in many countries. Malaysia, which purports to be a democracy, is such a country. Students have informally discussed this with me, and the basic view is that it is improper to criticize their government.

A brief analysis of several speeches will demonstrate this. In four sections in two summer sessions, I had a total of thirty-two foreign students. Each student was required to prepare a speech detailing a harm in an existing policy system and a second speech detailing a justified proposal which would solve the problems outlined in the first speech. Among other things, these two speeches characterized a speaker operating in a democratic society--a speaker exercising free speech. Of the thirty-two speakers, only two dealt with issues directly associated with their countries. A student from Singapore, who became a fairly close friend of mine, addressed the issue of computer crime in his country. A Jordanian, discussed pollution in the Gulf of Aqaba. The rest of the students generally took

common topics of concern in the United States, such as drug abuse, divorce, and violence on television; occasionally they addressed international issues outside their native country.

Ordinarily, I would not respond at all to the issue of a lack of analysis of their home countries. I encourage foreign students to enlighten us about their cultures and governments, but I do not require it. Thus, the lack of such speeches would not have raised my curiosity. The choice of topics about the United States could have been the result of the comparative ease of research, for example. However, another reason did surface.

Some students indicated to me that it was not only unacceptable to speak openly against their own country in that country, but that the composition of the speech class hindered their choice of speech topics. Some were openly fearful of being reported to their government by colleagues. The sentiment was echoed in both years' summer sessions and vigorously reinforced privately. Because of the nature of their governments, many students were extremely reluctant to discuss native issues.

My concern over the educational ethics of teaching foreign students stems from two belief structures. First, I adhere to a fairly traditional view of public speaking--the creation of sound ideas well communicated. Secondly, I hold in the highest esteem our right to speak freely. Most of us

in the discipline probably share these beliefs. Being so deeply involved with foreign students, however, has made me question both beliefs. While I believe both are educationally sound for Western students, does the same hold true for international students, primarily those from Oriental countries?

Given my rather limited experience with classes here, I am comfortable in saying that foreign students generally respond the same way as most Western students might to the concept of an ideal speaker. Perceptions of delivery in the group surveyed were prominent, but I believe this to be the case with the general student body as well. While the ideal speech may be primarily based on rationality, we know the effective speech is not always so. The foreign students seem to accept and apply the basic rhetorical principles upon which our speech course is based. I see no ethical quandry in that part of the analysis.

However, the use of free speech principles as a basis for teaching the course may have greater ramifications. To many students there is a cultural and political admonition against open criticism of power. My own naivete surprises me more than the fears of those students. The idea that students would "spy" on others sounded preposterous. In Malaysia, however, the cultural mix of political forces lends plausibility to the students' fears. Fortunately, I have never insisted that these students address problems

from their own countries but only suggested it. By chance, an ethical dilemma was averted. I believe it is outside the realm of educational practice to place a student in jeopardy. In this case, the jeopardy would be to his/her education in this country.

I will continue, however, to explain the concept of free speech in even the lowest level speech course. I believe the principle is a human one, only codified by governments. Its denial in any corner of the globe is a travesty.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Foreign Student Director, Fall Semester, 1984, SDSU, compiled by the Foreign Student Advisor's Office. A summary statement provided by the same showed 311 students in 1985-86.

[2]"Fact File," Chronicle of Higher Education, July 23, 1986, pp. 25 & 33.

[3]John T. Masterson and Norman H. Watson, "An Investigation of Cultural Differences in Perceived Speaker Effectiveness," presented at the Annual Convention of the International Communication Association, May 22, 1981.